



# Getting a New Call Sign— The Hard Way

By Ian Stone

**I**t was nearly fall when I decided to spend six days camping in Talladega National Forest with my black, Labrador retriever, Boomer. I knew the risks of camping alone, but my experience as an avid hiker since childhood—and the fact I wasn't going into extreme conditions or terrain—lulled me into a sense of false security.

Taking all the food and gear I would need, including my cell phone, I set off along the Pinhoti Trail. My first night was tranquil and without incident. The second day, I hiked to a campsite next to a large creek. After lunch, I set up camp, then headed up the creek, wearing a pair of sandals.

Rain started falling about an hour later, so Boomer and I returned to camp to take a quick nap before dusk. When I awoke, I wanted to start a fire but couldn't until I had some fresh, dry leaves. I donned a headlamp, strapped on my sandals, and went out about 10 meters.

On the trip back, I felt a sudden, searing pain on the top of my left foot. After a few involuntary expletives, I glanced down but didn't see anything. I then felt a second wave of pain, this time more intense, with a strong sensation of heat. I instinctively

reached down, grabbed my foot, and looked around. I was confused until I saw a 16-to-18-inch copperhead snake slithering away in the leaves. I unsnapped my sandal, took off my wool sock, grabbed the skin on my foot, and squeezed as hard as I could. I did this for about 30 seconds, then hopped to the tent.

Still a bit in disbelief, I sat down to collect my thoughts. I didn't feel like I was in any immediate danger. I contemplated sleeping it off because hiking out didn't seem like an attractive option. Several minutes later, however, I started feeling some shortness of breath and became dizzy. I looked at my dog and noticed his ears were all the way back, and he was holding up his left paw. I realized we both had been bitten.

I immediately turned on my cell phone, knowing I would find no service. I pulled out a map and plotted the quickest route to help—more than two miles away, along a power line to a paved road. Grabbing my Camelbak®, map, and headlamp, I strapped on my boots and headed out with Boomer. We had hiked about 20 minutes when Boomer became incapacitated. Now, I had an extra 75 pounds of unwilling dog to carry.

By this time, my left foot had the combined sensation of being broken and asleep. I tried in vain to continue but had to stop 20 minutes later. It was clear I needed help if we were going to make it out, so Boomer and I rested a bit. The sensation in my leg had spread about two-thirds of the way to my knee. I also noticed Boomer's whole left paw and leg up to his shoulder had swollen to about two-and-a-half times their normal size. He was shaking badly and lying on the ground, with his eyes slowly drooping closed. We got back up, though, and made it to the highest point around, where I again tried my cell phone. This time, I was able to reach a 911 operator and asked for help.

I realized from looking at Boomer that he might be dying. I felt I could hop and continue on by myself, but I knew Boomer couldn't make it, and I just couldn't leave him behind. The 911 operator was only too happy that I had decided to stay put. It would be two hours, though, before the rescue teams would find us in the dark.

They took us out on two ATVs. I went to a local hospital, while my dog went to an emergency animal clinic. The ambulance ride was short, and, as I sat in the emergency room, I had time to think about what had happened. My mistakes became clear to me as I sat there, hooked up to several machines, with drugs flowing into my body. The veterinarian who was treating Boomer visited me and said he wasn't sure if my best friend would



Sandals are no match for critters like this copperhead. When you go camping, always wear boots.

survive the night—luckily, he did. My emergency-room physician, on the other hand, said I wasn't in any immediate danger. As he explained, my activity and the motion of my foot had kept the snake's venom from remaining too localized, which reduced the tissue damage. He added, however, that I wouldn't be up and walking for a while.

I knew from the beginning of my camping trip that it would be a gamble to go alone. Another mistake I made was to move around the campsite at night wearing only sandals, not boots—a common habit of hikers. When I set out for help, I didn't take my parka with me. If I hadn't been able to get help, I would have had no way to protect myself against Mother Nature, other than the clothes I was wearing. I also didn't have a whistle, which limited me to using just my voice to guide the rescue teams to our location—try shouting for two hours sometime. Last, I didn't have a snakebite kit with me; however, I now own one.

Here are a few things I did right:

- ✓ I stayed calm, assessed my options, then set out with gear that I knew I would need—minus the parka, of course.

- ✓ I had a fully charged cell phone; I'll never travel without one.

- ✓ I had a high-quality, lightweight headlamp with fresh batteries.

- ✓ I kept my situational awareness with the map and knew exactly where I was all the time. Twice, I was tempted to take large forest roads not marked on the map. Traveling alone, injured and at night, though, on an unknown and unmarked road is a bad idea. Knowing where I was made a difference for the rescue teams.

- ✓ I still remind myself how lucky Boomer and I were to be in great physical shape. It made a difference in our ability to get help and, later, to recover from our encounter. Never set out on an expedition if you aren't in top physical condition. Your life may depend on it.

My only problem at this point is figuring out how to keep my "Niles" call sign. Some people would like to change it to "Snake." ➡

*The author was a Marine Corps major assigned to the staff of CNET when he wrote this article.*